

“A Twitter, a Coo, a Subdued Roar”: Animal Symbolism in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*

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The function and significance of animal symbolism is perhaps not among the most often discussed aspects of *Invisible Man* (1952), but this intricately layered system, partly informed by the cultural heritage of the African American protagonist of the novel, certainly contributes to the novel’s thematic complexity. As I argue, by highlighting the narrator’s otherwise not overtly stated point of view concerning characters, events, or ideas, animal imagery questions the racist stereotypes of the white-dominated society in which the protagonist struggles to find his identity.

I propose that the animals in *Invisible Man* can be arranged into two major categories. Most of the animals in the novel are birds and other airborne and quick-moving creatures evoking dignity and freedom, while other animals belong to the group of earth-bound, often physically strong mammals, such as cattle or bears, readily associated with unsophisticatedness or steadiness and stability. The animals in the first group are generally present when the narrator talks about white characters, while the other group is predominantly mentioned in relation to African Americans. Also, the latter category further diverges to incorporate two characters, the bear and the rabbit, of African and African American folklore. When either inter- or intracategorical merging occurs, a critique of the stereotypes associated with the categories emerges: in each instance, animal symbolism comments on the absurdity of the simplified views that white people seem to have about African Americans, and on the process by which African Americans internalize and cope with these views. It also illustrates the struggle of the protagonist to maneuver his way amidst the stereotypes that have been instilled in him by the dominant white society.

In the following, I will offer a classification of the references and allusions to animals appearing in the novel and discuss the ways in which animal imagery reflect on the issue of racial stereotypes in the US. I will introduce one striking example for each of the above-mentioned categories, and then will explore the overlaps that exist between the two major groups. The description of the overlaps of the two major categories follows the chronological order of the four major stations in the protagonist's life, because, as Susan Blake writes, "[e]ach stage in the protagonist's personal history corresponds to an era in the social history of black Americans": the time the narrator spends in college corresponds to the Reconstruction Era, his first few weeks in New York City reflect the hopeful Roaring Twenties, his membership in the Brotherhood resembles the Great Depression, and, finally, the riot he partakes in mirrors the Harlem Riot of 1943 (126–27). The way animal symbolism is used in the novel slightly changes with these four major stations of the protagonist's life depending on the stage of his quest for finding his identity. Finally, I will discuss the intracategorical merging that occurs within the category of earthbound animals on the basis of the hero's cultural heritage to further illustrate the difficulties faced by him during his inner journey.

Bird symbolism is predominantly connected to white people in the novel. Ellison's narrator uses one of his most significant animal-related figures of speech early in the novel in the "battle royal" scene in which the narrator experiences his first humiliation. After he prepares to give a speech full of pathos "at a gathering of the town's leading white citizens" (*Invisible Man* 18) and before he is manipulated into participating in a fistfight, he has to endure standing next to and looking at a "magnificent blonde," who is "stark naked" (20). He has to participate in a ritual that, according to Houston A. Baker, Jr., "is akin to a castration, excision, or lynching" (834). After the woman begins her erotic dance, designed to confuse and shame the unsuspecting teenagers around her and to entertain the above-mentioned white elite, the narrator remarks that "[s]he seemed like a fair bird-girl girdled in veils calling to me from the angry surface of some grey and threatening sea" (20). The veils created by cigar smoke (20) accentuate the bird metaphor by associating flight with the lightness of the smoke veil. The adjective "fair" also calls to mind clarity, purity and lightness.

Apart from being connected to whiteness, birds are also associated with Americanness as evidenced by the description of the dancer. Correspondingly, with her yellow hair, heavy make-up and firm breasts (20), the blonde is described as the stereotypical American beauty. Moreover, a “small American flag tattooed upon her belly” (20) reinforces her being a true American woman, an idol, and a symbol of the United States. The dancer, likened to a bird, represents white America not only through her fairness and bloneness, but through the miniature image of the country on the center of her body as well.

By contrast, the narrator associates mainly heavy, slow, pathos-free animals with African American people. In the prologue he identifies himself with a bear because of his lifestyle: “[c]all me Jack-the-Bear, for I am in a state of hibernation” (9). This metaphor is twofold in its implications: on the one hand, it may allude to bears in general as the invisible man lives in a basement, in “a hole in the ground” (9), evocative of a cave where a bear may lie dormant during the winter. On the other hand, just as the narrator describes the bird with a brief narrative—as calling from above a sea—he alludes to a story in connection with the bear as well. Also named Spring-heeled Jack (“Russian Jack”), this bizarre, demonic creature was known for his quick leaps and jumps startling pedestrians on London streets (Upton). Parallels between characteristic movements and acts of Jack-the-Bear and those of the narrator allow for naming himself after this creature.

When the narrator draws upon the image of the dormant bear, he may only refer to his individual circumstances underground, but when he fuses this image with that of a horrifying figure in an urban legend, the focus is not necessarily only on him anymore, but on his fellow African Americans suffering from stereotyping. At the beginning of his monologue the narrator recants the story of a fight he had with a white man when he decided to crawl out of his hole, saying that he “sprang” at the unsuspecting pedestrian (7). The day after this fight, a newspaper reports a street robbery (8), which suggests that from the white society’s point of view, the attacker is nothing more than a mugger—an obvious racial stereotype. Thus, the image of Jack-the-Bear signifies not only the narrator, but blacks in general, which is why it is a prime example of a figure of speech that connects bears with African Americans in the novel.

Arguably, attributes attached to the two main categories of airborne and earth-bound as described above overlap and merge. The bird-girl is

not so dainty and dignified, while the bear is not so earth-bound and crude after all. Although the physique and movement of the blonde dancer remind the narrator of a bird, the blue eyeshadow she uses prompts him to think of a far less sophisticated animal: "the eyes hollow and seared a cool blue, the colour of a baboon's butt" (20). The narrator does not only perceive the girl as a delicate, elegant lady, as an object of his desire, but also as the object of his hatred and the cause of his shame. She is a white woman degrading herself to become an object of men's gaze, moving powerlessly for the viewing pleasure of the audience. In this regard, she is similar to the black teenagers who are forced into battling each other so that they could entertain the white crowd. Amidst all the sexual urges and shame he feels, the narrator senses this link, and comments on it subtly by conflating white privilege and black rawness.

The bear metaphor at the beginning of the novel is also extended and connected to a metaphor that involves an airborne creature in order to indicate African American's desire to get closer to being white. The narrator hiding beneath the surface of the earth likens himself not only to a bear, but to a chicken about to be hatched, too: "remember, a bear retires to his hole for the winter and lives until spring; then he comes strolling out like the Easter chick breaking from its shell," he warns us (9). Living the life of a bear is temporary because the underground creature will soon transform itself into a spring chicken, full of promise and hope. Notwithstanding, his Easter resurrection is ironic since he is not supposed to turn into a "fair bird-girl," only into a chicken incapable of flying. Even so, this resurrection carries the hope of the invisible man of turning into a visible, active agent. As he says so himself: "[a] hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action" (15). As a consequence, again, white privilege and black rawness are combined thus underlying that it is desirable for a black man to be more like a white man, even if a somewhat handicapped white man; thus, a black, invisible man is better off having half the privileges of whites than none at all.

Apart from these two significant instances, there are several other occurrences where there is an overlap or at least a meeting point between the animals that represent blacks and whites in order to highlight the unsavory conduct of seemingly dignified white men. The audience of the battle royal consists of eminent white men who seem to give up any sense of decency while watching the naked dancer. One of them, "a certain merchant" is "drooling" at the sight (21), and he is dressed in an

obnoxious manner to show off his wealth: he wears “diamond studs in a shirtfront;” yet, he lacks dignity. As the invisible man recalls, the merchant’s clothing is set off by his big belly and bald hair, and his posture is “like that of an intoxicated panda” (21).

Other seemingly ordinary, descriptive metaphors debase the white crowd to the level of animals that are thought to lack dignity. Despite being dressed in their tuxedos, the “big shots” of the town are far from behaving gentlemanly as they are “wolfing down the buffet foods” in the ballroom (19) and they are “howling” after the dancer when they chase and touch her with their “beefy fingers” (21). Although “beefy” generally means only fleshy, that is, fat, here its connotation recalls beef, thus, cattle.

To sum it up, here the narrator uses the image of a bear and other earth-bound animals to comment on the character of the merchant and the other men, in order to contrast it with that of the boxing crew. The boys are clearly ashamed of their desire as one of them faints (20), another begins “to plead to go home” (21), and yet another uses his boxing gloves to try to conceal his erection (21). In contrast with their reactions, the “big shots” lack the sophistication that they are supposed to have: the merchant does nothing to conceal his excitement, and the rest of the audience only cares about satisfying their animalistic desires. Without specifically addressing this contrast, the narrator notices it, and deals with it on the level of figures of speech. Comparing a supposedly upper-class white man to a hypnotized panda bear and later calling him a “creature” (21), thus dehumanizing him, he confronts a stereotype: he acknowledges the discrepancy between what a distinguished member of white society is supposed to behave like and how he actually acts.

The images of both airborne and earthbound animals seem to be particularly frequent in the descriptions of the college, its surroundings, and its authority figures. The lush section of the school premises is bustling with free birds and bees, selling the illusion of carelessness and freedom, but the lifeless spot separated from this idyll is populated with animals whose nature is determined by their instincts. This nature then, as later hinted at by the narrator, mirrors the behavior of black students who are critiqued for their unthinking acceptance of the status quo. Parallel to this, the statue of the supposedly respected, trail-blazing and almost sacred Founder stands desecrated by the high-flying birds, which represents cynical white power.

The invisible man “many times” reminisces about the “beautiful” buildings of the school and the scenery that surrounds it, and the pages on which he introduces them abound with descriptions of the natural world (32–4). However, he separates this scenery into a colorful and a barren part. He remembers the colorful and rustic part with his eyes closed and mentions iconic signifiers of the South including romantic vines, tree logs, the scents of magnolia and wisteria, and also humming bees and singing mocking-birds (32). The narrator’s memories on the levels of emotions and sensuality inevitably link him with his own cultural heritage, with his own roots in the South. After a “sudden forking” of a road, he always opens his eyes and faces a section “barren of buildings, birds, or grass” (33), void of any natural majesty. Here, the road leads to a mental institution, which suggests that trespassing is forbidden for students and that the premises are not supposed to be visited by guests either. Therefore, the carefully crafted garden of the graceful, vine-covered school buildings and the chapel, complete with its lawn and roses, is the only place intended for students and visitors alike; it stands in stark contrast with the barren soil that is interrupted only by thistles, broken glass and stones and whose animals include only earth-bound rabbits and ants (33).

The tameness and instinctual pattern of behavior of the earth-bound animals of this desolate section highlight and condemn the automated behavior of the African American college students. The juxtaposition of the tameness of both the rabbits and the college students involves irony. The rabbits are “so tame through having never been hunted” (33), says the narrator. Later, he describes students about to enter the chapel as brainwashed automatons, which calls into mind the tame, playful, yet mellow rabbits. An ironic contrast emerges here: the rabbits may indeed be docile because fear of hunters or stronger animals is not ingrained in them, but the black student body should be aware of centuries of exploitation that their ancestors underwent. Instead, their “eyes are blind like those of robots” (33), and they are oblivious to the fact that they *have* been hunted.

The image of the ants invites associations similar to those of the rabbits. They are “moving nervously in single file” on the barren ground (33), suggesting that even though they are neither tame nor playful, they are disciplined enough not to break away from what they are supposed to do. Thus, ants are also similar to the numb students who spend their Sundays with their “uniforms pressed, shoes shined, minds laced up, eyes

blind” (33) to the injustice inherent in the *status quo*. Thus, through the use of rabbits and ants, the narrator points out that by being blind, the unthinking college students appropriate a racial stereotype akin to that of the “docile Negro.”

The next metaphor that involves birds comments on the unequal relationship between whites and blacks that stems in part from the fact that the former determine the course of the latter’s life through the power they possess, and in part from the above-mentioned docility.

While describing the premises of the college, the narrator recalls the “bronze statue of the college Founder,” which shows this oft-mentioned figure with his “hands outstretched in the breathtaking gesture of lifting a veil that flutters in hard, metallic fold above the face of a kneeling slave” (33–34). The narrator muses over whether the Founder really does lift the veil or he just lowers it “more firmly in place” (34). The otherwise crucial motif of blindness and vision is rendered less important here because the statue is “bird-soiled”. The invisible man writes: “there is a rustle of wings and I see a flock of starlings fighting before me and, when I look again, the bronze face, whose empty eyes look upon a world I have never seen, runs with liquid chalk” (34). The “bird-soiled” statue implies that whatever intentions the Founder has, the fact that whites make some concessions and allow a black leader to establish a college is but a grand gesture that does not involve any real respect or understanding on their part.

The “Trueblood episode” in Chapter 2 is also replete with animal imagery. The presence of earth-bound oxen and delicate birds in this scene subtly suggests that neither the white nor the black population is a monolith: just as Norton shows interest in the African American college while being oblivious to a hungry white man, the narrator identifies with the white man instead of the “black mob” seen in old photographs. The scene with Jim Trueblood’s account of his incestuous relationship with his daughter contains similes and metaphors which either dehumanize African Americans or are associated with sexuality, suggesting that African American men have an animalistic nature, which they can transcend only with the freedom that sexuality, however transgressive, provides. This scene also subverts these very assumptions about African American men by hinting at the inappropriate feeling the white Norton might have about his daughter.

In the introduction of the Trueblood scene, that is, in the sequence where the narrator and Mr Norton drive around and off campus, the

narrator muses over photographs taken in the school's early days, showing black "men and women in wagons drawn by mule teams and oxen" (36). He remarks that members of this "black mob" with "blank faces" do not seem to have any individuality, therefore making it difficult for him to regard them as actual human beings (37). When the car passes a "team of oxen hitched to a broken-down wagon" (37) with a white driver (38), the narrator asks Norton whether he has seen "that" (37). Norton answers that he could not see it, and declines the offer to turn back to have a look (38).

The narrator's interest in the wagon can be explained by the fact that a white man with a "lean, hungry face" (38) drives it, reminding him that mules and oxen are not to be regarded as mere props in a photo taken in the previous century, but as working tools of a member of the most privileged race in the present. This incongruity creates fear in him (38), which he wants to share with Norton, whose indifference suggests that below his superficial interest in the campus and the life of the black college students, he disregards its everyday reality. In this regard, he is similar to the narrator, who is so enamored with the presence of this glamorous Northern millionaire that, instead of empathizing with his ancestors, he identifies "with the rich man reminiscing on the rear seat" (37). A further parallel between the protagonist and Norton is established when, moments after they pass the oxen, the narrator notices a "flock of birds" circling nearby in great harmony (38). The "invisible strings" with which the birds seem to be connected (38) stand in contrast with how disconnected the narrator and Norton are from their respective heritage and responsibilities.

The following scene, in which Norton meets Trueblood, the incestuous sharecropper, first establishes Trueblood's animality and crudeness and then modifies it with images of birds signifying freedom. When he is introduced to the reader, his animalistic nature is emphasized: formerly a "country blues singer" (Baker 829), Trueblood used to perform "'primitive spirituals'" that were enjoyed by white visitors but brought embarrassment to the students because of the "crude, high, plaintively animal sounds" he made (*Invisible Man* 43). His wife, seeing him raping their daughter, screams "like a woman who was watchin' a team of wild horses run down her baby chile" (54), and then she calls him a "low-down dog" (56).

Trueblood, the "magic storyteller" (Baker. 831), intersperses his narrative of the incestuous intercourse with sexually suggestive images,

such as “young juicy melons spilt wide open a’layin’ all spread out” (*Invisible Man* 50), going through doors and reaching the top of a hill (51). Among these images are “quail huntin’” and “the boss bird whistling,” coming toward him softly, almost seductively (50), and then a “flock of little white geese flies out of the bed” (52), followed by Trueblood himself almost flying and floating (53).

Sexuality, freedom, flying, and birds are all conflated in these images. As Susan Blake notes, flying, often expressed through bird imagery, is “a predominant motif in black-American folklore as well as in Western myth,” but while its meaning in Western traditions usually centers around potency or power, “in black-American folklore, it means freedom” (124). As Blake points out, “the mythic and sexual meanings of the metaphor [of flying] are of course implicit in the aspiration to freedom” (124), and, according to Baker, Trueblood’s “sexual prerogatives” stand in contrast with “other Afro-Americans in his area [who] are either so constrained or so battered by their encounters with society that they are incapable of a legitimate and productive sexuality” (832). Trueblood’s freedom gained through sexuality is illustrated even when, after his wife beats him, he indeed looks “just like a jaybird” (*Invisible Man* 56).

However, the idea that African American men are crude, animal-like taboo-breakers is subverted by hinting at a form of incest that Norton, a white man, commits. Norton feels “incestuous desires for his daughter” (Doane and Hodges 36) as evidenced by his monologue he delivers to the narrator. After eloquently describing her beauty, he says that he is reluctant to believe that she is his “own flesh and blood” (39). Zsolt Virágos calls this uncanny infatuation “spiritual (...) incest” (159). Thus, the stereotypical representation of Trueblood is modified to debunk another myth about African Americans.

The way the narrator describes the two black authority figures of the college, Bledsoe and the Founder, illustrates the ambivalence surrounding their intentions and legacy, and denies the preconception that is instilled into the college students about the powerful yet benevolent whites who selflessly support the poor and utterly subservient blacks. Dr Bledsoe, the African American president of the college, is often depicted as someone who wants to transcend his skin color. His first job, given to him by the Founder, was to feed hogs (98), and now, in his own description of himself, he feeds lies to white trustees (116), whom he respects and pleases only for their power and money (119). Arguably, in

his role as a feeder, he supplies the “hogs” with what they need. Meanwhile, he is two-faced and wants to emulate these “hogs” in his appearance as he wears a “swallow-tail coat” (96), just like the elegant white visitors of the school.

The connection that exists between birds and another authority figure, the Founder of the school, also disrupts the perceived dynamics between rich whites and wanting African Americans. The Founder leaves his (earth-bound) horse and buggy, that is, the everyday reality of his race, in the middle of a road upon being so instructed by a mysterious figure (102). Afterwards, he is surrounded by images of birds: his statue being bird-soiled indicates that whites do not necessarily take him seriously, but a singing mockingbird sitting on the same statue later (113) signifies that whites use him as a convenient pedestal from which they can make their voices heard.

After the narrator is forced to leave the college and moves to New York City, the same principle of earth-bound and airborne animals is maintained; that is, earth-bound animals evoke black characters, while airborne animals represent white characters. Within the city, however, a geographical division emerges to illustrate and criticize the uneven distribution of living space: in Harlem, the residents of which are predominantly African American, animal symbolism with bears and monkeys prevails, yet birds surround the protagonist just as often as white people do in other parts of New York City. On the streets of Harlem, thus, the narrator hears a street singer’s song about a woman who looks like a monkey, a frog (140), and a bulldog (141). The same hobo asks the invisible man whether he has the dog or the dog has him (142). Then he says that a bear has gotten hold of him as “this Harlem ain’t nothing than a bear’s den” (143), which in turn reminds the narrator of long-forgotten characters like Jack the Bear (also spelled Jack-the-Bear in the novel) and Jack the Rabbit (143). If a resident of Harlem ventures into other parts of the city, whites are polite toward him, but do not really see him: “they would have begged the pardon of Jack the Bear, never glancing his way if the bear happened to be walking along minding his business” (139).

Outside of Harlem, however, airborne animals prevail just as white people do. In Manhattan, near Wall Street, the narrator sees gulls soaring (136), while in Emerson’s office there are tropical birds (148), “their squawks [sounding] like screams in a nightmare” (157). However, Emerson Jr., who is the only white man to be honestly sympathetic

toward the narrator, has a connection to blacks as well: he is “a primitivist, who frequents Harlem nightclubs, collects African art, and reads *Totem and Taboo*” (Blake 127), so, correspondingly, his office features statues of both birds and horses. The statues of airborne birds connect him to his skin color, and the statues of earth-bound horses signify his empathy toward African Americans. References to birds abound after the narrator leaves Emerson’s office. On the street the protagonist hears a song about “poor Robin” who has been picked clean (158). Even the Long Island company that he works for, Liberty Paints, has a screaming eagle as its trademark (161), further illustrating the prevalence of white people in the area with images of airborne animals.

The neat geographical division that associates Harlem to earth-bound animals and the rest of New York City to airborne animals ceases to exist only during and after the electroshock treatment as it makes the deepest psychological processes of the protagonist come to the surface. Regardless of the precise physical location of the therapy, this section of the novel is “populated” with many animals ranging from mockingbirds through monkeys, whales, and alligators (191) to fish (195), illustrating the narrator’s chaotic mental state. Furthermore, the therapy is a watershed event that “erases all memory save for patterns of soul, song and mother wit” (Cartwright 62), making it possible for the narrator to identify with a folklore character.

The inclusion of the rabbit in this episode serves, among other things, as a chance for the narrator to critique the stereotype of the “infantile Negro.” The doctors administering the treatment have preconceptions evident in their questions about Buckeye the Rabbit and Brer Rabbit (197). They, among other things, expect a “matriarchal black family” (Cartwright 63), and “they are regarding folklore as the expression of a childish personality, safe and hence ‘normal’ in a black subject” (Blake 128). Thus, the scene denies the stereotype of the African American person with whom a white professional can interact only by condescending to his or her level.

A highly effective use of animal symbolism is present in the Brotherhood section as well as the chapters immediately following it, with a view to contest the idea that blacks constitute a homogeneously aggressive crowd when it comes to defending their rights. These episodes describe both the Brotherhood and its nemesis, Ras the Exhorter, in terms of earth-bound animals, but establish a contrast in their respective temperaments. While Brotherhood members are described with the help

of a European, quite timid animal—the dog—, Ras is first associated with energetic bulls, and later, with menacing African animals. This distinction between the portrayals of the organizations reflects the differences that exist between their ideologies and temperament. The Brotherhood strives to modify the existing system by giving elaborate speeches thus manipulating crowds, but Ras and his disciples intend to achieve radical changes by appealing to emotions and by action.

Curiously enough, Brother Jack, the cunning leader of the Brotherhood, is treated as a black man on the level of animal symbolism. Whether he is white or African American can be debated as his skin color is never explicitly stated in the novel. The fact that he reminds the narrator of a black-and-white dog (273) indicates that this ambiguity is purposeful. Yet, Alice Bloch reads him as a white character (1020). His red hair corroborates this theory, though it is not impossible for African Americans to have hair with a red tinge. Also, his devotion to the African American cause, as well as his insistence on being their brother and not their father or master (*Invisible Man* 380), insinuate that he is either black or has a strong desire to be treated as such.

Brother Jack is often likened to a dog, for example, he moves like a fyce (234) and looks “like a toy bull terrier” (273). He may seem quick on his feet, but upon closer inspection, he projects no real danger. Dogs appear in descriptions of other members of the Brotherhood as well: Brother Tarp escapes from captivity by befriending dogs and making them think he is one of them (312). When the narrator realizes that he is “dominated by the all-embracing idea of Brotherhood,” he sees clues to his future in “dog-luck fouled on the pavements” (308). Brother Wrestrum says he roots out his faults “like a man cauterizing a mad-dog bite” (317). This latter example is also ironic because by faults, Wrestrum means revengefulness and distrust that work against the Brotherhood (318), yet, these are the exact qualities that some Brotherhood members turn out to show toward the narrator. In fact, when he feels betrayed by them, a dog attacks him on the street (445).

On the other hand, Ras the Exhorter is often associated with bulls in order to emphasize his impulsiveness and strength. First, Brother Jack drags the invisible man into the Brotherhood, causing him to be aware of Ras, and he drags him into the El Toro Bar as well, where the disciple begins to understand the symbol of Ras. The bar is advertised by “a neon-lighted sign of a bull’s head” (287). Just as Jack disapproves of Ras’s tactics, he finds bullfights barbarian, and just as the narrator is captivated

by picture of a bull and a toreador, he is drawn to Ras himself (289). When fighting with Tod Clifton, Ras looks like a “drunken bull,” tries to “bull his way out” (298), and pants “bull-angry” (299).

The idea that the intellectual Brotherhood is embodied by but a dog, albeit a vicious one, in comparison with the passionate, raw members of the group organized around Ras the Exhorter, is further emphasized amidst the chaos of the riot when Ras is transformed into “Ras the Destroyer” (447). Although earlier Tod Clifton remarks that Ras “makes [his name] sound like the hood of a cobra fluttering” (304), it is only during the riot that he is likened to even more threatening animals. He wears “a cape made of the skin of some wild animals around his shoulders” (447), which later turns out to be a “lion skin” (453). Ras even “lets out a roar like a lion” (453). What is more, like white policemen, he sits on a horse (447), which signals that he is somehow above the Westernized African Americans: he treats horses, symbols of Westernized African Americans, in the same way white people do, that is, as mere vehicles.

As birds represent white people and their freedom coveted by African Americans in the earlier sections of the novel, flying and, more specifically, birds, can also be connected to Tod Clifton, suggesting that in spite of what happens to him, he is able to preserve his inner independence. When Clifton is still a member of the Brotherhood, he mocks Ras, saying that it would be fitting of Ras to “say something about ‘Ethiopia stretching forth her wings’” (304), imagining this country as a soaring bird. After abandoning the Brotherhood in search of a more authentic solution, Clifton seemingly succumbs to madness and begins selling Sambo dolls on the street (348). Christopher A. Shinn claims that Clifton and the doll “mirror each other as they reflect aspects of the minstrel tradition; Clifton becomes a puppet of the Brotherhood, manipulated and made to dance” (254). However, seconds before recognizing Tod, the narrator sees flying pigeons in the street (*Invisible Man* 350). The birds continue to circle and swing around Clifton, and they keep plummeting and diving when he is shot (351). Then, a policeman remarks that Clifton is nothing more now than a “cooked pigeon” (352), no longer representing freedom, but pigeons keep flying during and after his funeral (364-65), signifying that the policeman is wrong.

Animal symbolism plays an extremely important role in addressing the novel's underlying theme of sexuality and its transformative power that can disrupt the presumed, race-based boundaries between crude, earth-bound blacks and sophisticated, airborne whites. When Jim Trueblood commits incest, he transits from the realm of earth-bound animals into the realm of airborne ones, a process mirrored in the scene when the narrator gets a white woman drunk in order to spy on her prominent husband. The woman, Sybil, sees the narrator as "Brother Taboo-with-whom-all-things-are-possible" (416) and a "*domesticated* rapist" (419, emphasis added). Further references to animals abound in the scene, establishing her opinion that black men are animalistic. She enthusiastically tells the narrator that her friend has been insulted and raped by a huge "brute," a "buck" (417), and after the faux rape, she calls the narrator "a strong big brute" (422). Then the narrator himself begins to laugh as if he was roaring (422). The references to his animality culminate in Sybil's definition of him: "[a]nonymous brute 'n boo'ful buck" (425).

Meanwhile, images of birds are associated with Sybil, the white woman: she "pluck[s] at the corner of the pillow, drawing out a speckled feather and stripping the down from its shaft" (418). Also, when the narrator fantasizes about Rinehart's mistress, a "desirable" woman he could have seduced on account of his similarity to Rinehart, he imagines her as a "bright-eyed bird-girl" and "is afraid to frighten the bird away" (412). Lynn Veach Sadler claims that "[t]he White bird-girl of the smoker and White Sybil are thus tied to Rinehart's girl in the narrator's fantasy" (22), so these instances coupled with the blonde dancer's description as a bird-girl reinforce that the narrator links delicate birds to women about whom he fantasizes. However, when Sybil is worried whether she "put up a good fight" during the faux rape, the narrator flatters her by answering, "[l]ike a lioness defending her young" (422). Thus, in order to suit her fancy, he distances Sybil from her delicate femininity and moves her closer to the realm of the exotic and wild.

The subtlety and complexity of animal imagery is most evident in the Harlem riot scene where birds, representing whites as established in the novel, literally begin to chase the narrator into the heart of a riot. Ironically, this scene also makes the narrator's dream described in Chapter 1 come true in a literal sense. Before the protagonist attends college, he dreams about a series of envelopes stamped with the seal of

the state that lead him to a final envelope with a note in it: "Keep This Nigger Boy Running" (32). When the president of the college sends the narrator off with faux letters of recommendation that essentially keep him running from one prospective employer to another (156), the dream comes true in a figurative sense. Correspondingly, the narrator's running away "blindly, boiling with outrage" (430) from the birds implies his desperate attempt to escape from the whites. Meanwhile, in a matter of seconds, he notices a flock of birds and hears partly real, partly metaphorical animal sounds: "a twitter, a coo, a subdued roar" on the streets (429):

I looked above towards the sound, my mind forming an image of wings, as something struck my face and streaked, and I could smell the foul air now, and see the encrusted barrage, feeling it streak my jacket and raising my brief case above my head and running, hearing it splattering around, falling like rain. I ran the gauntlet, thinking, even the birds; even the pigeons and the sparrows and the gulls! I ran blindly, boiling with outrage and despair and harsh laughter. Running from birds, to what, I didn't know. I ran. (430)

Paradoxically, in this climactic moment, while trying to save his own life, the narrator still uses a white-male-defined object, his calfskin briefcase as a shield to guard himself from a white attack. Recognizing that neither white nor black ideology assists him in defining himself and finding space in society, he burns the documents in the briefcase (457) in his disillusionment, whereby the briefcase loses its significance.

Animal figures of the African American folklore tradition figure into the web of animal signification of the novel in a case of intracategorical merging, that is, one that occurs within the category of earth-bound animals. Pre-slavery, African tales morphed into the stories published by Joel Chandler Harris (1845–1908) whose work, considered authentic (Cartwright 129), has been known by generations of African Americans. In his essay "Ralph Ellison and the Dilemma of Artistic Synthesis," Virágos proposes a classification of animals in *Invisible Man* based on two major characters from these tales who are referenced in the novel as well, Brer Rabbit and Brer Bear. He argues that African American trickster characters resembling the shrewd and fast folklore character Brer Rabbit continue to play tricks upon the protagonist resembling the slow yet honest Brer Bear. The article also argues that as the invisible man is not only outwitted by his grandfather, Trueblood, Bledsoe, Lucius Brockway, and Brother Jack, but he even identifies with

the bear character—saying “call me Jack the Bear” and prompting the reader to “bear with [him]” (161–62).

Undoubtedly, the characteristics of the folktales’ rabbit are displayed in the characters enumerated by Virágos, and the parallel can even be applied in a wider sense than he proposes because, as Cartwright notes, “*Invisible Man* is probably the American novel most informed by Brer Rabbit’s modes of knowledge and power” (62). For example, the protagonist’s grandfather is not a trickster mainly because, as suggested by Virágos, he adds to the hero’s confusion (161), but because his strategy of “overcom[ing] them with yeses” (*Invisible Man* 17) is obviously subversive. Similarly, Trueblood can also be considered rabbit-like, but not because he, by rendering the story of his incest in front of a white trustee, he contributes to the invisible man’s losing his scholarship (Virágos 161), but because he revels in the white society’s tendency to romanticize black transgressions. Trueblood capitalizes on a phenomenon seemingly prevalent among wealthy, decent whites of the novel: they seem to find a perverse satisfaction when they see their worst preconceptions about the barbarity of blacks come true. Furthermore, he is similar to Brer Rabbit because the rabbit is also “ruled by lust and hunger” (Kerenyi qtd. in Ellison, “Change the Joke” 67), is “outside of human rules” (Cartwright 125) and he has “the capacity to survive and flourish in a world in which society can be and often is predatory” (Rubin qtd. in Cartwright 125).

However, the extent of the similarity between the protagonist and the figure of the slow-to-learn bear can be debated. While it is true that the protagonist seems inflexible and naïve when he, for example, is slow to recognize that Bledsoe and Brother Jack are dishonest with him, he progresses from his utter naivety to a more aware state during the course of the plot. In fact, during his electroshock treatment, he identifies with the rabbit figure remembered from his childhood, and this is the “first identity that the narrator steadfastly claims and answers to” because it has not been erased (Cartwright 63). Even if the narrator is unable to connect to his cultural heritage when in college, as evidenced by his already mentioned conversation with Norton on the campus, after finding an “old” self with which the narrator is “giddy” (*Invisible Man* 197) to identify, he changes: from this point on, he goes on to take a more active role in shaping his future, going as far as playing tricks on Sybil and Brother Jack, and also trying to pass for Rinehart. On the one hand, he identifies with a bear at the beginning of the novel, that is, at the end of

the narrative, which signals that he turns away from his developing trickster persona. On the other hand, he steals power (10), subverting the electricity company's capitalistic authority, thus playing a trick on them. He also says that his story is far from being over, suggesting that he is far from accepting the gullible nature of the bear figure.

The multifunctionality and complexity of animal symbolism as discussed in this paper proves to be powerful in providing additional layers to social and cultural commentary in *Invisible Man*. Numerous instances as presented above reveal stereotypical beliefs about the delicate, sophisticated animals associated with white people and the crude, pathos-free animals evoking African Americans. However, subtle animal imagery also debunks myths associated with expected white and black behaviors, among them the myth that both blacks and whites constitute an undifferentiated monolith, and that one is supposed to find his or her place in the world through all-encompassing definitions given by others. Animal references on the most subtle level, that of folklore, highlight the choice between accepting or battling the impression cultural heritage leaves on a young person trying to navigate through a changing world. Animals, whether through their direct presence, embeddedness in a figure of speech or in folkloric building blocks, help the reader gain insight into the protagonist's unspoken thoughts and behavioral patterns, revealing much about the choices he has to make during his quest.

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